

Notes on the Rise of Independent Media Daryl Chin 1994

Although independent media - that is, media produced outside the commercial industry - has existed in many guises since the invention of motion pictures a century ago, its current preponderance in the United States has many determinants. For independent producers, the issue has been access - access to the means of production, and access to audiences through distribution mechanisms. Since the commercial media industry is one of the most concentrated of capitalistic enterprises, the economic determinants of media production make access a graphic demonstration of the enforcement of social stratification.

Independent media production in the U.S. illustrates most vividly the clash between commerce and art. As last winter's stalled GATT negotiations over Hollywood's dominance of European film markets illustrates, the European model of filmmaking has always viewed films more as cultural than commercial products. From the very beginning, there were "films d'art," which often documented great performers such as Bernhardt, Loie Fuller and Pavlova. Private patronage allowed many artists, including Man Ray, Picabia and Duchamp to create films. State-subsidized filmmaking provided the impetus for the careers of many European filmmakers, among them Ingmar Bergman, Francois Truffaut and the Taviani Brothers.

In the United States, the initiatives to create a base for noncommercial filmmaking came to fruition in the 1960s, when government arts funding agencies were established. One result was a shift from reliance on private funding to an acknowledgment of public funding. Many of the major cultural institutions in New York City had been created privately in the 1930s, including most of the major museums, such as The Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. When American arts funding began to coalesce in the 1960s, comparisons were made to European funding, yet the capitalist base for media production in the U.S. was so strong that independent initiatives often seemed hopelessly outmaneuvered.

Since then, government arts funding has enabled media organizations to provide access to work-shop instruction and equipment for many groups previously disenfranchised from both the art world and the media industry. The result has been an increase in independent media production that is truly reflective of cultural diversity. I would like to suggest some of the ways in which independent media has evolved, and how NYSCA has played a crucial role in these developments.

The current media landscape is marked by a great fluidity. Inexpensive media, resulting from recent advances in video technology, have produced a greater ease and immediacy in media production. Cable access shows, which often have lower production values, and reality television programs - which often intentionally adopt a low-tech look - have engendered different attitudes in relation to technical requirements for mainstream media. And the media environment continues to evolve. Movies are packaged in different formats, from videotape to laser disc to CD-ROM, in addition to the traditional celluloid formats of 35-millimeter and 16-millimeter. Video has advanced from single monitors to large-scale projection, while high-definition and interactive technologies continue to improve. The possibilities seem infinite, the permutations and variations on media practices, media distribution and media consumption seem endless. To paraphrase a song by Timbuk 3, the future's so bright, we're gonna need shades.

By asserting the potential for technical ingenuity, artists have created new low-budget forms of media creation involving intensive cross-fertilization. This mixing of forms would have been considered heretical in the late 1960s, when video emerged as a fully defined art medium.

At that time, the distinctions between video and film were extreme. There were many historical and technological reasons for this separation. But a major factor was an essentialist aesthetic regarding

materiality which characterized all the arts at the time, from painting (Frank Stella, Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski), sculpture (Tony Smith, Donald Judd, Carl Andre), dance (Simone Forti, Yvonne Rainer, Deborah Hay), as well as the media arts. In avant-garde film, many filmmakers defined materiality by emphasizing cinema's "pure" elements-light, film grain and the dimensionality of the filmic image. Films such as Tony Conrad's *The Flicker* (1966), Ken Jacobs's *Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son* (1969) and Ernie Gehr's *Serene Velocity* (1970) were insistent in their medium specificity.

But during the past decade, the intermix of media has intensified due to the expressive needs of artists seeking ways to create moving image work with budgetary flexibility. The mixing of film and video technologies has opened up new aesthetic options and enabled numerous ingenious redefinitions -for example, having Super-8 film footage transferred to video; or shooting and editing on video and then transferring it to 16-millimeter film. In these ways, the integrity of medium boundaries does not seem as important as it once was. In a sense, the message now defines the medium. In this regard, Kathe Sandler's recent documentary *A Question of Color* (1993) can be seen as exemplary.

Released theatrically in 16 millimeter, this "film" is actually a mix of 16mm film and video footage transferred to film. It addresses the issue of color-consciousness among African-Americans, and poses these questions: Are light-skinned blacks favored over dark-skinned blacks? Are standards of beauty among African-Americans defined by white society? Sandler combines interviews, footage of various people interacting with friends and family, archival film footage and television clips. This mixture of material is reflected in the mixture of formats. Because the urgency of her subject is most important to Sandler, she uses everything she can to explore it.

The media hybridity of *A Question of Color* has become a norm for independent medimakers, for whom the issues of funding and access have been crucial. The democratization implicit in the funding directives of the New York State Council on the Arts has thus been of immense benefit. Though terms such as "cultural diversity" may now appear to be merely tokens of fashion, there really has been a marked increase in diversified media. Organizations funded by the New York State Council on the Arts, such as Third World Newsreel, Women Make Movies and Electronic Arts Intermix, now distribute film and video works by what has been dubbed "underrepresented populations": African-Americans, Asian-Americans, Hispanic-Americans, Native Americans and women. The fact that these works and these organizations exist is a tribute to the initiatives of arts funding since the 1960s. Hence, the idea of diversity, once established, has been central to the development of independent media. NYSCA funding has seeded projects that have helped to identify audiences previously ignored by the mainstream media, Movies by Claudia Weill, Spike Lee, Todd Haynes and many others have defined women, African-Americans, and gays as constituencies, as major media consumers.

In trying to reflect the contemporary world, the artist is confronted with the media environment. Television is ubiquitous; home video has made the creation of moving image work as simple as picking up a camcorder. Telecommunications seem to be burgeoning with new technology. There is so much that our electronic environment encompasses now; the issue of ensuring that there is equal access to this new technology is one of the rationales for government funding of educational facilities. To extend this argument: at this point, a working knowledge of computers is a fundamental necessity. So much depends on computer literacy now, that to lack this knowledge puts an individual at a tremendous disadvantage. But what if you can't afford a computer? What if you go to a school where there are no computers? The public education system must make an effort, even though strapped for funds, to provide access to computers to all students, so that this important tool can be part of every student's kit of skills.

In her first review as staff critic for *The New Yorker*, Pauline Kael wrote: "Movies have been doing so much of the same thing - in slightly different ways - for so long that few of the possibilities of this great hybrid art have yet been explored When Melies photographed his magic shows, when D.W. Griffith

re-created the Civil War or imagined the Fall of Babylon, when Pabst made a movie with Chaliapin, when Flaherty went to photograph life in the Aran Islands or the South Seas, they were just beginning to tap the infinite possibilities of movies to explore, to record, to dramatize. Shipped in tins, movies could go anywhere in the world, taking a synthesis of almost all the known art forms to rich and poor. In terms of the number of people they could reach, movies were so inexpensive that they could be hailed as the great democratic art form.” (1) Though movies would seem to be comparatively inexpensive, the initial investment (camera equipment, film stock, lighting and sound equipment, etc.) remains prohibitively expensive for most people. But, starting in the 1960s, an era which saw a resurgence of interest in the democratic process, with civil rights, feminism, and gay rights among the causes igniting people's passions, media arts centers formalized attempts to disseminate the process of filmmaking to as many interested constituents as possible. Film became an integral part of liberal and fine arts education, with many colleges and universities offering courses in filmmaking, film history, and film theory. Many media centers offered access to equipment, which enabled new artists to develop.

One example is the Millennium Film Workshop in New York City. One of the founders of Millennium was the filmmaker Ken Jacobs, whose *Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son* (1969) remains a landmark film utilizing techniques of rephotography. The optical printer at Millennium proved to be central to the aesthetic of a number of filmmakers who took filmmaking workshops at Millennium, including Marguerite Paris and Barbara Hammer. As emerging filmmakers in the 1970s, they continued to utilize the optical printer as the nexus of the architectonics of their work, often redefining and reclaiming imagery as specifically “female,” radicalizing this imagery further by a direct assertion of lesbianism. Thus, in this way, the tradition of the new in cinematic experimentation can be seen as a continuum, whereby the formalist techniques employed by Jacobs provided inspiration for other artists, who extended the techniques with personal imagery.

Jacobs himself remains a precursor of much that has happened in the independent cinema. Starting in the early 1960s, he began to use small-gauge filmmaking (8-millimeter, Super-8) to create extended narratives. In some cases, he has used 8-millimeter footage and blown it up to 16-millimeter to redefine the narrative implications of a previous work, as in the recent manifestations (circa 1990) of *The Sky Socialist*, begun in 1965.

In 1972 Paul Sharits stated: “Stan Brakhage's massive work is too expansive in its implications and richness to discuss here except to mention that his use of the camera as a behavioral extension, his forceful modulation of disjunction, ‘distractive’ ‘mistakes’ (blurs, splices, flares, framelines, flash frames, etc.) and his decomposition - reconstitution of ‘subjects’ in editing, because of their cinematically self-referential quality (they reveal the system by which they are made), bring cinema up to date with other advanced arts.” (2) Brakhage had utilized the subject of childbirth in his films *Window Water Baby Moving* (1959) and *Thigh Line Lyre Triangular* (1961); by the early 1970s, feminist theory began to question the deployment of feminine experience as the subject for male spectatorship. Marjorie Keller created a film, *Misconception* (1976), which reconstituted the techniques pioneered by Brakhage to reclaim the birth imagery from a feminine perspective. She also added sound in order to redefine her cinematic enterprise, allowing the female “voice” to be heard as a counterexample to the silence that defined Brakhage's aesthetic. Keller worked in Super-8; she also worked in 16-millimeter, and her films often examined the differences in the textures between the different film gauges. This was particularly acute in her film, *Daughters of Chaos* (1981), a lyrical evocation of the shifting emotions of girlhood.

Keller, along with Leslie Thornton, Peggy Ahwesh, and Su Friedrich, was conversant in the varieties of different types of media production. Mixing their formats, these women created a critical feminist experimentation. One of the tropes providing an impetus for their works has been the use of autobiographical material: Friedrich's *The Ties That Bind* (1984) and *Sink or Swim* (1990) are

examples. In defining this approach, Scott MacDonald has written: "By the 1980s, Friedrich was becoming convinced that the rejection of personal filmmaking, structural filmmaking, or other approaches did not 'liberate' cinema in any practical sense; it simply narrowed the options. The issue was not to avoid the personal or the systematic, but to reappropriate and reenergize as many useful dimensions of the previous film-critical practices as possible. Indeed, the consolidation of traditionally distinct arenas of independent film was to become one of Friedrich's signature strategies." (3)

This consolidation is characteristic of a great many recent works in media, and narrative and autobiographical concerns have provoked an intense affectivity in the works. Some notable examples include Alan Berliner's *Intimate Stranger* (1991), his portrait of his grandfather; Rea Tajiri's *History and Memory* (1992), her investigation of the internment experience of her parents; and Roddy Bogawa's *Some Divine Wind* (1991), his narrative about the repercussions of World War II on a young Japanese-American student. These works fracture and continually redefine their stories, allowing breaks to comment on continuity, just as the intermingling of media proposes alternative perspectives.

I have tried to suggest some of the ways that independent media has permuted in the current period, and to suggest the place that organizations such as the New York State Council on the Arts have played in that development. For arts funding, the issue is access; rather obviously, the question of quality never can be addressed without ambiguity. What arts funding can hope to do is provide equal opportunity for those with an interest in pursuing the arts. In his critique of the institutionalization of avant-garde film in 1987, J. Hoberman declared: "It's not my intention to justify those who ignore the achievements of the American avant-garde.... Nor do I wish to discourage those who labor to extend those achievements. Their lot is tough enough: Film is fearfully expensive and hard to get right. The number of labs dwindle as the price of raw stock climbs - and even more than the rest of us, a-g filmmakers are oppressed by the waste and idiocy of most commercial movies.... Films like *Scorpio Rising* and *Flaming Creatures* were neither made for the avant-garde ghetto, nor contained by it; now avant-garde films appeared to illustrate particular doctrines or appeal to specific audiences. The rise of the institution subsidized mediocrity no less than genius." (4) Since Hoberman wrote his essay, the situation has actually gotten worse, because the economics have become even more prohibitive. Inexpensive film stocks have been phased out of the market; the grain of the film has been diminished, with a corresponding loss of richness and depth of hue; film stocks have been stabilized by narrowing the tonal range, leaving the exposed film with bland visual harmonics. One of the greatest of American filmmakers, Bruce Baillie, has spoken of the rigidity of the new film stocks, their inability to register subtleties of texture. Yet he has started to experiment in video, trying to discover ways to develop visual textures with simple home video equipment.

The revolution in media envisioned by Nam June Paik when he began to use the first video Portapak in the mid-1960s now encompasses a far broader range of possibilities. In "A Call for a New Generation of Film-makers" from 1959, Jonas Mekas exhorted his readers "to bring our film up to date. Hollywood films (and we mean Hollywoods all over the world) reach us beautiful and dead. They are made with money, cameras, and splicers, instead of with enthusiasm, passion, and imagination. If it will help us to free our cinema by throwing out the splicers and the budget-makers and by shooting our films on 16mm as Cassavetes did, let us do so." (5) Now, the same call would include Super-8 and video (Betacam, VHS, High-8), in addition to 16-millimeter. We have seen the implementation of varied modes of production as an enabler of access for a wide diversity of voices and visions. In this, the place of agencies such as the New York State Council on the Arts remains incalculable, for all the difficulties in determining validity. The access to media may not be limitless, but certainly there would not be opportunities for women, African-Americans and other ethnic Americans, without the impetus that institutionalization provided. The contemporary media environment continues to expand; the question is whether this environment will remain open to alternative modes of expression, or whether the encroachment of the commercial system simply is inevitable. In this, the directives provided by arts funding remain one of the major sources of decentralized production.

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- 1.Pauline Kael, *Going Steady* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1970), p.3.
- 2.Paul Sharits, "Words Per Page", in *Afterimage* (No. 4, Autumn 1972), p.3.
- 3.Scott MacDonald, *Avant Garde Film: Motion Studies* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 0. 103.
4. J. Hoberman, *Vulgar Modernism: Writings on Movies and Other Media* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), pp. 174-177.
5. Jonas Mekas, in *Film Culture Reader*, edited by P. Adams Sitney (New York: Praeger, 1970), p. 75.

"There are, and always will be, contrary arguments surrounding the value of state support for the arts. But NYSCA support encouraged the foundation and private sectors to join in, and led to the development of enviable position which New York still maintains in relation to video and the media arts. At a time when the role of government support for the arts is questioned on so many levels, it is appropriate to step back and thank that intrepid agency whose willingness to lead should never be forgotten"

David A. Ross

Alice Pratt Brown Director, Whitney Museum of American Art

"During the years when I had the honor to serve on the Film Panel, I became more conscious than ever before of the importance of state support of the arts, especially of film and video making. Despite the pleasure and inspiration it can give us, Hollywood has not – and probably cannot – represent the healthy range of insight into our diverse culture we must have if our democratic ideals are to be more than fantasy. A modest investment by state government in the film and video alternatives to the industry can play an important role in giving voice and audience to the full, glorious range of our media culture."

Scott MacDonald

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